

The Fatalist King and the Divine Sage

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Keywords

Buddhism; Beliefs: karma and rebirth

Notes for teachers

Buddhist teachings take for granted the idea that we are all trapped in a beginningless cycle of rebirth and redeath (called *saṃsāra* in Sanskrit and Pali). The cycle can involve birth as a human, animal, god, hell-being or ghost. Whether we end up in a good rebirth or a bad one depends on *karma* / *kamma* – the actions we do. An action is good if it is motivated by good intentions or mental states such as generosity, non-attachment, compassion and wisdom. That it is a good action is affirmed by its karmic fruits, both in this life (for example being healthy and successful) and in future lives (for example in being born in a heaven or as a high-status human). Karmic fruiting operates as an impersonal force – there is no god in charge of handing out rewards and punishments.

Because karmic laws encourage people to behave well, any teachings that threaten this idea threaten the foundations of good society. In this story we see that principle in action: a king is persuaded by the teaching that there are no consequences to our actions, and as a result he starts misbehaving. Only a lengthy teaching from his daughter, and the interventions of a divine sage (identified as the Buddha in a past life), can save him from the terrible consequences of his bad karma.

As well as reinforcing the truth of karma and rebirth, this story helps us explore the different realms of rebirth. While the princess recalls past lives as humans and animals, the divine sage also teaches the king about the horrors of the hell realms. All of these possible realms of rebirth are ultimately temporary, but nonetheless Buddhists wish to ensure a good rebirth and avoid the torments of hells.

We also see some specific results of specific acts, in particular the idea that female birth and birth as a castrated animal result from having been a man who pursued other men's wives. This must have been a deterrent for male audiences, but is obviously problematic for a modern egalitarian audience!

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Questions for Discussion

Comprehension of the story

What does the naked ascetic teach?

Why does the king enjoy the teaching?

How is the teaching supported by the (incomplete) past-life memories of the two bystanders?

Why is Princess Ruja worried about her father?

What arguments does she use to try to persuade him he is wrong?

What do we learn about her past lives and the way that karma works?

Why is the princess unsuccessful in changing her father's views?

How does the divine sage manage to finally persuade the king?

Application to other contexts

Why is it important to believe that actions have consequences?

If you thought there were no consequences to what you did, how would you behave?

Setting aside the idea that actions affect a person's rebirth, what other consequences do actions have that might encourage someone to behave well?

Does desire for heaven and fear of hell motivate actions in other religions too?

Reflecting on wider Buddhist issues

What does this story teach us about karma and the different realms of rebirth?

Why is a fatalist teaching so dangerous?

What do we learn about the karmic consequences of pursuing the wives of other men? What do we learn about the karmic causes of female birth? What does this tell us about early Buddhist attitudes towards women?

Why is it that memory of past lives can cause problems but can also make for a helpful teaching?

Sources / Further Reading

This version is summarised from *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* 544. A full translation, as well as useful introductory material, can be found in Naomi Appleton and Sarah Shaw (trans.) *The Ten Great Birth Stories of the Buddha* (Silkworm, 2015) and an older translation can be found here: <http://sacred-texts.com/bud/j6/j6010.htm>

The Fatalist King and the Divine Sage

Long ago there was a virtuous king, who ruled his kingdom well. During a festival he stood on his terrace with his ministers admiring the full moon. “What should we do on this fine evening?” he asked. “Let us visit a religious teacher!” replied one of his ministers. The king approved, and off they went to pay their respects to a famous naked ascetic* who was living in a park outside the city.

The king greeted the ascetic and asked for a teaching. The ascetic replied: “Great king, listen to my true and correct path! There is no fruit, good or bad, in righteous conduct. There are no other realms, for who has ever come back from them to tell us? Beings are all equal, and all are equally fated to their destiny, so there is no point in exertion or effort. There is no reward for generosity, and no need for revering our teachers or elders. All beings are gradually purified during 84,000 great aeons, reborn multiple times. Nobody can achieve liberation before this time, and whatever we do we cannot hasten the process.”

One of the king’s ministers spoke up: “I approve of this teaching. I am sure there is no fruiting of actions, for in a past life I was a cruel butcher, yet here I am reborn as a rich minister.” Another bystander also spoke of his experiences: “I see now that there is no reward for good action, for in a past life I was a noble and virtuous man, yet here I have been reborn as a lowly slave. Well, I shan’t bother being good anymore!”

The king too was delighted with this teaching. “All this time I have wasted trying to do the right thing, honouring holy men and administering justice, having no fun meanwhile. You have shown me a better way. Now even listening to your teachings will not prevent my pleasure. I will take my leave.”

And so the king, believing that moral action is pointless, appointed his ministers to look after the kingdom and began to spend all his time with women, even with the wives of other men.

The king had a single daughter, named Ruja, who was very virtuous, and when she heard what had happened she was upset. On the next holy day (the day of the full or

* In India at the time of the Buddha there were lots of rival teachers, most of whom practised some form of asceticism (bodily austerities, such as fasting or living in the wilderness) and some of whom abandoned clothes.

new moon) Princess Ruja visited her father, as was normal, to ask for money in order to give alms. The king replied: “You have wasted enough money in this way! You ought to just eat the food and drink yourself, as there is no merit in denying yourself or giving gifts.” He told her about the teaching he had received from the naked ascetic, and the stories of two bystanders that had supported the teaching.

Princess Ruja was unimpressed: “Your majesty, you are wise! Yet I see now that a man who follows a fool becomes a fool himself! If there were no fruit in actions then why does this man live as a naked ascetic? Led astray by such ideas people will make lots of demerit and suffer in the future.”

She continued: “These bystanders could not see the full picture. Let me illustrate with a simile: A boat can take a great burden, until it becomes overloaded, and then it sinks. In the same way a person may do bad deeds and only sink into hell after he accumulates a lot. This minister you mention must have not yet accumulated enough evil to sink to hell, and did good deeds in past lives too.”

Seeing that the king was not yet persuaded, the princess decided to tell him of her own past lives: “Your majesty, I remember seven past lives. In my seventh past birth I was a goldsmith, and led on by an evil friend I did a lot of bad deeds, including going after other men’s wives. That karma remained like fire covered by ash, and in my next birth I was born as a wealthy treasurer. I was virtuous and did a great many good deeds, which remained like treasure buried in the water. Next my bad karma caught up with me and I was born in a hell and boiled on account of my actions as a goldsmith. After all this torment I was born as a castrated billy goat, forced to carry people around and pull heavy carts. In my next birth I was a monkey, son of the leader of the troop, who bit off my testicles in order to prevent me becoming a rival. After that I was born as an ox, a beast of burden, and then at last as human again, though I was neither male nor female. All this was because of my pursuit of other men’s wives when I was a goldsmith. Finally I was born in a heaven, and now as a princess, and I will remain female for seven more lifetimes because of my bad karma. So you see, father, that actions follow you over many lifetimes.”

Still the king was unmoved. In desperation the princess implored the gods[†] to intervene, to save her father from his evil actions and their inevitable consequences. A god heard her, and, taking on the appearance of a sage, he

[†] In Buddhism gods are part of the realms of rebirth, and though they have long lives and many powers and pleasures, they will eventually die and be reborn again.

descended to the palace and stood in the air near the king. The king was amazed by this display of power and asked, "Who are you, sir, and how are you able to stand in the air in this way?" The divine sage replied, "I am a god, come from the heavens. I have these powers because of the good actions I performed in past lives."

"Are there really other realms as you say?" asked the king. "Indeed there are, your majesty." "If that is the case," replied the king, smiling, "then lend me five hundred gold coins and I'll repay you a thousand in the next world!" The divine sage replied, "I would certainly do that if I could trust you to repay. But who is going to follow you into the hell realms to reclaim a debt? When you are being pecked at by birds, or pulled apart by iron-toothed dogs, who will reclaim a debt then? Or when you are drowning in the caustic river of hell, or being forced to pull carriages over red-hot coals, who will approach you to reclaim a debt there?"

After the divine sage had given a long and detailed description of the hells, the king was terrified, and begged him for a teaching. "Be good to your citizens and give generously and you will avoid hell and enter heaven," replied the divine sage. Having instructed the king, the divine sage disappeared into thin air. The king reformed, and never again doubted that actions have results in future lifetimes.